

BRITISH JOURNAL OF VENEREAL DISEASES

DAMAGED LIVES. By C. J. Eustace. Published by Putnam, London, 1934, pp. 221. Price 3s. 6d. net.

THIS may be regarded very much as an experiment in the way of a novel. Both publisher's note and preface declare its intention as a vehicle for propaganda on venereal diseases, and no doubt therefore its success or otherwise in the book world will be taken as a measure of the public interest in a problem of public health. But the particular problems of public health presented by syphilis and gonorrhœa are at the same time, by the vast majority of those who may have to think upon such matters, found to be more intimately personal than those of any other disease. Sales, the usual criteria of success, may in fact be some measure of the book's success as a novel, but whether the number of copies sold may also be taken as an indication of its success in enlightening the public in regard to the dangers of venereal disease or not, is another matter.

The sensational title and the low price—3s. 6d.—may attract many purchasers who would hesitate to buy a novel at the more usual price of 7s. 6d. And their interest may cease with the purchase. Not unlikely so, for the average reader chooses his book in order to be entertained—not in order to be educated in matters of public health.

For success as propaganda, one would have advocated a somewhat more subtle method than that employed in this case—that what is now the foreword—an argument for sex education and enlightenment of the public—should constitute the epilogue. Let the reader, already intrigued by the low price and the sensational title, read the story; find his thoughts set rolling, directed towards an enquiry as to why are these things allowed to be? how can they be prevented? and the more personal! could these things happen to me?—then to find in the epilogue the answers to the many questions.

Such is the more subtle way of good propaganda.

The story, based on the film of the same title, is itself on the whole well told—though with here and there a touch in style which hints at the amateur—or that the author has not entirely surmounted the difficulties of elaborating a scenario into a tale—a much more difficult task than the reduction of a tale to a scenario—a task rendered even more difficult for the author in this case, where, owing to the intrinsic object he had set up before him, he has had to incorporate with his romance of passion the realism of syphilis and gonorrhœa.

Some clinical critics may think he has carried realism too far, and gone beyond the scope of accepted practice—when he allows the specialist to take his treatment-shy patient round a clinic to make first-hand acquaintance with the devastations worked by syphilis and gonorrhœa.

The film on which the novel is based drew its huge crowds, we are told. Was their interest sentimental, morbid, curious, or actually vital? According to the nature of the answer to this question the success of the propaganda designed may be gauged.

The bias of the story would appear to be on early treatment after exposure to infection rather than in avoidance of promiscuity. Prevention by self-disinfection does not appear to be mentioned in the tale.

N. M.